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From the dairy cows Land O'Lakes Inc. gave to families in Malawi to the shelters and latrines the American Refugee Committee built for earthquake victims in Pakistan, federal funding has underwritten Minnesota's many efforts to help people around the world cope with poverty and disaster.

Minnesota's church groups, medical missions and farmers with surplus food to share all have leveraged federal foreign aid to do global good deeds.

But how much government aid will flow in the austere future that voters mandated in the November elections?

The fiery rhetoric of the mid-term election campaigns offered few clues. Critics of Washington's spending ways focused mostly on domestic outlays - on things like earmarks for pet projects in home districts.

For example, the campaign web site of Minnesota Republican Chip Cravaack - who scored a stunning victory over long-time Rep. Jim Oberstar - doesn't list foreign policy as a major issue, let alone foreign aid.

"We have an overwhelming number of new colleagues coming to Congress," Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn, said last month at a global aid forum at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

"Many of them ran on cutting budgets," McCollum said. "But they've wanted to talk about domestic spending, so I can only imagine where their views fall on foreign aid."

McCollum has served on the Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and also on the Committee on International Relations.

Americans who care about foreign aid need to get on their soapboxes and make the case "that

this is actually not only a very real human concern that we share as children of God but it's also a national security issue," she said.

In the long run, the United States will save money, she argued, if it can stave off the political instability that comes from hunger and disease in poor countries.

But advocates for global aid warn that every program is going to have to prove its worth if it is going to survive the spending cuts.

The willingness of the next Congress to fund global aid is "really unknown at this point," said U of M Prof. Michael Osterholm, who has promoted international efforts to curb infectious diseases and other threats to global health.

"I'm not sure it's just about partisan issues," Osterholm said. "Whether it's Democrat or Republican we do have real and critical budget issues confronting us....The big driving force is going to be what can we cut and what must we cut."

Which Republican attitude?

After the 1994 mid-term elections - when Republicans won control not only of the House, as they did again this year, but also of the Senate - there was a forceful push to slash foreign aid and eliminate the U.S. Agency for International Development. The agency survived to maintain its leading role in global aid efforts. But many critics continued to grumble about pouring money into nations that never seemed to overcome basket-case status.

Then came President George W. Bush with a bent for global spending. A new poverty-fighting agency, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, was created under his watch with strong bipartisan support. And many Republicans joined Democrats in dedicating millions of American dollars to the global fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.

The question now is which Republican attitude will prevail in the Tea Party era.

Many Republicans who voted for Bush-era aid programs have retired or lost elections. Meanwhile, one Tea Party favorite, Sen.-elect Rand Paul of Kentucky, pledged during his campaign to target "the billions of dollars we waste on foreign aid."

Obama's overhaul plan

But John Norris argues in a report by the Center for American Progress that there may be grounds for bipartisan work beginning with President Obama's bid to overhaul development programs.

Obama proposes to sharply focus the programs on countries that are willing to make a firm commitment to real political and economic reforms. He also would impose stronger measures of which programs actually work. And he would reach beyond USAID and the State Department to engage the Agriculture Department, Health and Human Services and other agencies in global aid work.

The president's new policy directive, Norris said, "will definitely require a concerted bipartisan push, including a concerted effort to get new Members of Congress on board with sensible reforms that are in the best interests of their constituents."

Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minn., who sits on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, cautiously agreed that the proposed reforms could open room for bipartisan action on at least some aspects of foreign aid.

In committee discussions about the reforms, "we had both sides of the aisle well represented," Ellison said at the Humphrey forum.

"Both sides of the aisle are concerned about empowerment of women and girls," he said. "Both sides of the aisle were concerned about issues of global health and all of these important development issues."

One key difference, Ellison predicted, will be renewed GOP scrutiny of aid going for programs that could be linked in any way to abortion.

"We will see the re-emergence of the pro-choice/pro-life debate," Ellison predicted. "That is back."

Helping ourselves by helping others

Minnesota has played a prominent role in global aid, especially in delivering support for health care and agriculture around the world.

In helping others, we help ourselves too, said Patricia Kenefick Stinchfield, who directs an immunization project and other programs for Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota.

"The world is all related, especially in terms of infectious diseases and vaccine-preventable diseases," she said. "If we turn our eye only to the United States, and we don't pay attention to diseases elsewhere, we will experience a resurgence of some diseases that we have managed well over the years. It will cost us in other ways."

One program she is promoting calls for vaccinating children against the deadly diarrheal disease known as rotavirus. It kills some 500,000 kids each year in developing countries.

In Minnesota, though, the disease has been all but eradicated since a vaccination program started in 2006. Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota confirmed only nine cases this year, down from 500 cases in 2004.

"If we can take this model we have seen right here in Minnesota and take it globally we can save the lives of many more children," she said.

Private funders: "We can't go it alone"

Another area where Minnesota is making a major difference is in the race to stop a rust disease called UG99 that has devastated wheat in Kenya and now threatens crops in much of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

U of M scientists, working with a global team, are developing wheat varieties that resist the fungal disease. And the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cereal Disease Laboratory on the University's St. Paul campus is one of only two secure facilities approved for research on the spores of the disease.

But state and federal belt tightening already is taking its toll on the research. The buildings and other facilities needed for the project are inadequate, Katherine Kahn, a senior program officer for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, said at the Humphrey forum.

The Gates foundation has joined the USDA and others in funding the wheat research. But Kahn stressed that the foundation can't carry the full project.

"We feel very strongly that this is something we do not want to go it alone on," Kahn said. "We need partners."

Will there be time?

Alex Palacios, another speaker at the forum, said he welcomes tough-minded scrutiny of aid programs. He is a special representative for the GAVI Alliance, a global immunization program with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva Switzerland.

But he fears that a spending-cut frenzy could foreclose chances for the truly effective programs to prove their worth.

"My one worry is that there is going to be such a rush of wanting to do something because the political imperative is so high to fix this problem and fix it now," he said.

What's needed, he said, is time "to have that kind of careful discussion, to look at the lessons of development over the last 10 years or so and make sure . . . that we maintain a focus and support what's working and if necessary we scale back on things that don't work."

